By What Authority?

For People Who Have No Religion

A Reading for Those Who Assume Paul Has Nothing to Say to Them

By What Authority? — For People Who Have No Religion
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Why Paul is probably not who you think

If you have no religious belief, Paul is probably not someone you expect to find relevant. His name has been attached to the justification of slavery, the subordination of women, antisemitism, submission to unjust governments, and the legal dispossession of indigenous peoples. These are not peripheral associations. They are the passages that did the most historical damage, and they are all in letters attributed to him.

That association is worth examining — not because Paul was an admirable figure or because his theological framework is one you should adopt, but because the passages that did the most damage may not have been written by him.

This is a historical question, not a theological one. You do not need to believe in God, in the resurrection, or in the authority of scripture to find it interesting. What did a specific first-century writer actually say? And how was his name used afterward by an institution with different interests?

What the scholarship shows about the damage passages

Paul's seven authenticated letters were written in the 50s CE — before any of the Gospels, before the institutions of episcopal authority, before Constantine. They were written to small communities in the eastern Mediterranean. They were then copied, circulated, and edited over the following century before the canon was fixed.

New Testament scholarship has, for more than a century, documented that the letters were altered during transmission. The mainstream position — represented by scholars like Bart Ehrman, whose career moved from evangelical Christianity to secular historical scholarship — is that the alterations moved in a consistent direction: toward the theological and social positions the proto-orthodox institutional church was trying to establish.

This series examines a stronger claim: that specific passages were inserted into the Pauline corpus by a coordinated editorial programme operating after 144 CE, when a man named Marcion published the first collection of Paul's letters and the institutional church was forced to produce its counter-canon.

The series applies five core evidence tests to every verse in Paul's authenticated letters, implemented in the technical appendix as twelve signal codes:

Structural interruption — passages that break the surrounding argument, where the text reads more coherently without them. The governing-authorities passage in Romans 13 interrupts an argument about love that flows continuously on both sides when it is removed.

Writing-style divergence — passages whose vocabulary and sentence structures differ systematically from the surrounding material, or that match the style of letters widely regarded as pseudonymous.

Patristic silence — passages not cited by writers who would have cited them if they existed. The women-silence passage is absent from early-church debates about women in leadership where it would be immediately decisive.

Institutional usefulness — passages that solve specific problems the institution faced after Paul's time. Problems that did not exist in the 50s CE when a small community met across household lines in a rented room.

Theological direction — the consistent asymmetry: every identified addition moves toward conditions, hierarchy, and institutional control. Not one moves in the other direction. Random copying errors scatter in all directions. A consistent direction indicates purpose.

The Marcion moment

Understanding who Marcion was makes the argument clearer and allows you to date the editing with some precision.

Marcion arrived in Rome around 140 CE from the Black Sea coast. He was a ship owner, theologically serious. He brought a position that was striking: the God of the Hebrew scriptures and the Father that Jesus described were not the same being. The Hebrew God kept accounts, rewarded obedience, and punished violation. The Father Jesus described extended himself to everyone before any account was opened.

The Roman church expelled Marcion in 144 CE. He founded his own communities, which spread rapidly across the empire. What matters here is what happened after the expulsion.

Marcion had assembled Paul's letters into the first known collection. When the proto-orthodox institution moved to produce its counter-canon, it had to respond to Marcion's text. The writers who did so — Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen — are the first people to cite the passages that most trouble secular readers today. Romans 9–11 appears in Origen arguing against Marcion. Romans 13:1–7 appears in Irenaeus defending Roman imperial authority. The women-silence passage appears in Tertullian arguing for women's subordination. 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, with its hostility toward Jewish people, appears in anti-Marcionite polemics.

In 2013, New Testament scholar Jason BeDuhn published *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon*. BeDuhn was not a Marcionite. His finding was simply that Marcion's text shows no evidence of the systematic editing his critics attributed to him. The passages missing from his canon are not missing because he removed them. They are missing because they were not there yet.

This places the burden of proof where it had not previously been placed. The question is not why Marcion cut out the troubling passages. It is why

the troubling passages first appear in the generation of writers responding to Marcion. The answer the series argues for is straightforward, though open to challenge: the passages were added in that generation, by those writers or their contemporaries, to produce the apostolic warrant the institution needed.

What Paul actually wrote

When the passages most reliably identified as later additions are removed, what remains is surprising.

Galatians required the least reconstruction of any letter in the corpus. It contains Paul defending the idea that the social categories Roman civilisation used to organise people do not constitute the community he is building:

> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28)

Paul is not offering an aspiration. He is arguing a specific point against specific people who are pressuring his communities to add conditions — ritual markers, ethnic belonging, law observance — to membership. His argument: you cannot attach conditions to something unconditional without destroying the thing itself. The prior arrival of grace dissolves the categories the Roman world used to sort insiders from outsiders.

Philemon extends this directly into the social world. Paul writes to a slave owner on behalf of a runaway slave, without invoking any legal right or religious command:

> *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a while was that you might have him back forever — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.* (Philemon 1:15–16)

Not: release him because the law requires it. But: the category that defined your relationship has been dissolved by something prior to it.

Romans, stripped of its contested sections, opens at its structural centre with:

> *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 8:1)

The chapter continues: nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God. No ruler. No power. No height. No depth. The claim is unconditional

and admits no exception for governing authority, institutional judgment, or legal condemnation.

This is not the voice of someone who believed governing authorities were divinely ordained and must be obeyed. This is the voice of someone who believed something prior to political authority had arrived and outranked it. The passage that reversed that position — inserted later, by writers who needed Christianity to produce politically safe subjects — is the passage that has done the most political work in Western history.

How institutions rewrite their founding documents

For a secular reader, the mechanism here is worth dwelling on, because it is not unique to early Christianity. It is how institutions work when they need their founding texts to say something the founders did not say.

The institution in this case had a specific problem. Marcion's Paul was politically dangerous: communities constituted by the dissolution of Roman social categories were not going to produce tax-paying, law-abiding, hierarchically stable subjects. The institutional church needed Paul to endorse the Roman social order, not subvert it. It needed him to tell communities to submit to governing authorities, to maintain household hierarchies, to keep women in subordinate roles. It needed the apostolic warrant.

The passages that provided that warrant were inserted into a corpus that had been circulating for a generation. The writers who inserted them were not incompetent. They worked with the material they had. But they were working under institutional pressure, in a short timeframe, into texts that had already been read and taught. The seams show because they had to be made quickly by people who had institutional needs rather than authorial ones.

The seams are detectable by five core evidence tests applied simultaneously, and by the fuller twelve-code signal apparatus in Companion A. Structural breaks. Style divergence. Historical silence. Institutional usefulness. Directional consistency. The control passages do not show this convergence. The strongest identified interpolations do — and the weaker cases are marked with lower confidence rather than forced into the same category. That consistency is the finding. It is not a finding that requires religious knowledge to evaluate. It is a finding that requires historical and textual methodology — the same methodology used to detect interpolations in Homer, Plato, and Josephus.

This is what the series is, at its core: an application of standard historical-critical methodology to a corpus that has been treated, for institutional reasons, as though it were exempt from the questions every other ancient document routinely faces.

What a secular reader finds in the reconstructed letters

Reading Paul's authentic letters with the most evidenced additions removed is not a religious exercise. It is a reading of what a specific first-century writer actually argued, separated from the institution that used his name for two thousand years.

The authentic Paul is arguing against the logic of conditional belonging. People are being pressured, in his communities, to add conditions — ritual markers, ethnic belonging, law observance — to membership. His argument is that you cannot attach conditions to something that arrived without them without destroying it. Grace, in his vocabulary, is the name for the prior reality that arrived before any accounting of worth was opened. The conditions are the destruction of grace.

Secular readers who have never engaged with this argument should note that it is not primarily a religious one. It is an argument about the logic of conditional acceptance and what it does to the thing being accepted. You cannot offer unconditional worth and then attach conditions to it. The moment you do, the worth is no longer unconditional.

What is striking — from a purely intellectual standpoint — is how much closer the reconstructed Paul is to what secular ethics has been working toward than the canonical Paul is. The canonical Paul tells you to submit to governing authorities, keep women silent, and maintain the household hierarchy. The reconstructed Paul argues that the categories governing bodies use to sort people have been dissolved by something that arrived before any of them. The gap between those two positions is not theological disagreement. It is the gap between two different projects, one of which was inserted into the other.

The downstream consequences: specific, traceable, ongoing

The governing-authorities passage — probably not Paul's — became the theological foundation for the doctrine of divinely ordained political authority. Two thousand years of political theology built on the claim that God institutes all governing authority.

The papers behind this are specific. Irenaeus cites Romans 13 defending Roman rule in the second century. Luther cites it advising German princes during the Peasants' War of 1524–25, arguing that the peasants have no warrant for resistance. Colonial political theology cites it to support submission to colonial governors. The papal bulls that licensed the dispossession of the Americas and Africa trace through this logic: if all authority is from God, and the church mediates access to God's will, then the church can grant and withhold temporal sovereignty. *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823) incorporated this into American common law, where it still governs.

These are not abstract theological consequences. They are specific political decisions, made by specific people, citing a specific manufactured passage, in situations where the human cost was concrete and immediate.

If you find the political history of religious institutions interesting — the machinery by which contingent historical choices get naturalised into "what the tradition has always taught" — this is one of the cleanest case studies available. The editing is detectable. The institutional interests it served are documented. The downstream consequences are traceable. And the mechanism for concealing the editing — treating the corpus as sacred and therefore exempt from the normal questions of historical inquiry — is itself part of the record.

What the argument is and isn't

This is not an argument that you should care about Paul, or that his theological framework is worth adopting. You are free to read the reconstructed letters as interesting historical documents and draw your own conclusions.

This is not an argument that the colonial claim was legitimate before this analysis and is delegitimised by it. The claim was morally indefensible on other grounds long before any textual analysis. What the analysis adds is an evidentiary challenge to the claim's documentary provenance, including at the foundational theological level.

This is not an argument that existing constitutional settlements automatically fail. Law does not work that way. But a legal system that cannot examine the evidentiary foundation of its own authority claims has a structural problem it cannot resolve from within. The examination is overdue.

The argument is falsifiable. The counter-arguments are in Appendix H of Volume 3. The methodology is stated in full. The evidence is checkable by anyone willing to follow the scholarly apparatus. This is not a polemic. It is a case built on evidence, and it invites examination.

Where to go from here

Volume 1 gives the argument in brief and is the best starting point. It presents the core claim, the methodology, and the primary evidence without requiring specialist background.

Volume 2 sets out the full textual evidence: the methodology, the manuscript record, the statistical analysis of writing style, and the verse-level adjudication of every passage in Paul's seven authenticated letters. For a reader with historical-critical interests, Volume 2 is where the evidence lives.

Volume 3 — The Chain from Scripture to Sovereignty traces the downstream chain from the interpolated text to current constitutional law. If your interest is primarily the question of how a manufactured document shaped Western political thought and colonial law, Volume 3 is the relevant volume.

If you want to read what Paul actually wrote, Companion B presents his seven authenticated letters with the most evidenced additions removed. You do not have to believe any of it. But reading it alongside the canonical text makes the direction of the editing visible — and the direction of every single addition tells you something about the institution that made it, and the interest it was serving when it did.

A note on the apparatus

Most academic work on questions like this is produced inside institutions, published behind paywalls, and accessible primarily to specialists who cite each other. The people with the most direct interest in the question — those whose ancestors' land was claimed on the authority this series traces, those whose political and legal arrangements rest on theological foundations that have not been examined — rarely have access to the apparatus that would let them test the claims.

This series made a different choice. The PDFs are free. The dataset is public. The signal weights, adjudication criteria, and confidence calculations are all documented and reproducible. There is no credential requirement and no paywall between the argument and the people it most directly concerns.

The argument is falsifiable and the tools to falsify it are already in your hands. If this is wrong, the evidence to show it is wrong is publicly available. That is not a rhetorical gesture. It is a structural commitment.

This document summarises the argument developed across the By What Authority series. Scholarly citations, methodology, and evidence are in the full volumes.